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## COELIAC DISEASE AWARENESS

# Local support group offers a helping hand

By CAITLIN PORTER  
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It is estimated that nearly 70,000 New Zealanders are living with coeliac disease, with around 80 per cent of them unaware they have the condition.

While there are no medical records kept in New Zealand as to how many people are diagnosed with coeliac disease, 36 people within the Mid Canterbury region are members of the national society.

Coeliac New Zealand's key contact in Ashburton Heather Stewart said she keeps in contact with the members, as well as others who have an intolerance to gluten.

She runs a support group that meets every two months, with around half a dozen members turning up each time.

"Now that things are so much easier it is really just for people who are newly diagnosed, but we keep it going to support them and show them what foods they can have and so on and where to find them."

Ms Stewart said while there are many different gluten-free options available in supermarkets and retail outlets, Mid Canterbury cafes and restaurants also offer up a good selection of food.

"I think they are more aware, and you get to know which ones are safe to eat at but on the whole people are more aware and they care more about it."

One of her main jobs now is to email members of the group, such as when gluten has gone into food by a manufacturer by mistake or when gluten-free items might be

on special, or new items brought out.

This awareness week Ms Stewart has been busy visiting GPs around Ashburton, dropping off posters and distributing leaflets about what coeliac disease is.

Coeliac New Zealand acting president Pip McKay said it is important for people to get tested if they had any family history, or associated themselves with the symptoms.

"Coeliac disease is genetic, so if you have the condition other family members may be at risk."

## ▶ WHAT IS GLUTEN?

- It is found in grains wheat, barley oats and rye.
- It is used in cooking and baking - and many prepared foods.
- Obvious foods that contain gluten include bread, cakes, cereal, biscuits pastry pasta, batter and breadcrumbs.
- Gluten is hidden in many seasonings and processed foods such as couscous, sausages, soups, stock, sauces, gravies and dressings.
- Gluten content is identified on labels and packaging.
- More information on Coeliac Disease can be found at [www.coeliac.org.nz](http://www.coeliac.org.nz).



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**Coeliac New Zealand key Ashburton contact Heather Stewart provides Allenton Medical Centre nurse manager Andrea Kinley with information about coeliac disease.**

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